“If you leave me, you will immediately die.”

What had I done? Why was he saying this? I’d been doing my best. Working to have faith, working to be obedient. Trying to believe. Eve had said that she trusted him because he quoted scripture. Reading the Bible, at least, was better than watching her screaming at the TV, urging her favorite boxers to kill each other.

I heard him shuffle his feet, turning away from me. “I’m hungry. Let’s …”

He did that strange twitch again, and again, his voice changed. Completely. He turned back to face me, a soft look in his eyes, as if an entirely different being were seeing through them.

“Lamb.”

Nothing made sense. Nothing had ever made sense, but maybe it was me. It must be me. Everyone in Woodbridge said so. I was … hard-headed. Didn’t give a damn. Smart but dumb. None of these things were true, but no one believed me, so why did it matter? I tried to obey, but every word I said was twisted, every thing I did, was wrong. No matter what. I wanted family, but no one believed me, no matter what I tried to say, or explain. And I always choked. The stares of disbelief, the shouts, the screams, the belt that was going to be for me, no matter what. And I certainly gave a damn. But no one else did. Not even when she held me over the stairs, pissed off because the belt was gone, but it wasn’t me. I wasn’t stupid enough to touch that belt, let alone hide it somewhere. I knew who had, of course, but it was no use. Die being pitched down the stairs, or die out here. What was the difference? Three children? From my skinny body? Right.

“You will bear three.”

How did he do that? Maybe it was true. All I could do was stare, because this gentle voice would probably not last long. But what was going on?

“Thus saith the Lord. You will bear My prophet sons. Say not ‘I am too young’ for have I not known thee from the womb? Yea, truly I say unto thee, you two are one, and you shall obey your husband as the Church obeys me.”

Nothing made sense, but at least this was better. In this tongue, he would not hit me. I would not have to lie down with him. Even the pain went away, when he spoke like this, whoever he was. Whoever this gentle voice was. The only voice, since Grandma Marie, that had ever made me feel loved.

He twitched, again. Oh, no. Not that look. Maybe he'd leave me alone if I was busy.

"Um, I need to wash my hair."

"You are lukewarm."

"What? How am I-"

The slap had come out of nowhere. More of a shock than pain. I'd taken beatings that made a mere slap in the face look like cotton candy. But this was the first time by his hand. What had I said?

"Do not question me."

When had I questioned him? I opened my mouth to ask what I had done wrong, but no sound would come out. I looked him in the eye. That was a mistake. I found myself on the ground before I saw anything.

Then, I could not breath. Something was pressing into my chest so hard that my lungs refused to move, my ribcage smashed into the ground:

"Never question me!"

This voice was different, but not that gentle voice that said I was safe, and not even the normal voice that told me to stay still, but a growl, that told me to hide, in silence, and play dead. Even the pain down there was starting to go away. *Maybe I will finally die, here.* It was better than bearing his children.

It had been months since I had a period, but that wasn't new. I'd skipped for six months in a row, back in Oxon Hill, back when I'd been held over those stairs. After that, I'd been sent to stay with Eve, and my periods had started again, when she made me eat more meat. And I'd been taking the metro to my summer job. He'd offered to teach me calculus over the summer, and Eve liked him. Then, Dad had come back.

Eve said that I had to go back with them, next week. I had no one else to talk to, and he'd told me to pack a bag. Something about a school in Florida, and protecting me. I knew about shot records, but he told me to just do it, and don't ask questions. Tell no one, because, who could I

trust? The one who held me over the stairs, or the one who drank and smoked? Obviously not the grandmother who let her husband kiss me, and certainly not the whoring mother who had sent me there.

So really, who, but the Lord, should I obey? Eve considered him a friend of the family, now, and said that I should be obedient to scripture. So did he. And I obeyed. But it was never enough. I was never good enough. No matter how hard I tried to obey, no one believed me. And nothing ever made sense. No matter where I was. I'd learned from my great grandma Marie that adults were supposed to be good, but none of them were, not even the other old folks. She believed in the Lord, so I wanted to believe. But I never got to see grandma.

But I could try to believe.

I heard footsteps, and looked up, but not far. I was too tired. "I'm not hungry."

Then it happened again.

"I love you."

Sometimes, he could seem so kind. Especially back before we'd left. Eve had told me that she and Dad had discussed my new friend, and that Dad called him a cradle robber, but she disagreed. She trusted him, as a religious man. I'd told him that Eve and Dad said I was too young to hang around with him, even for Calculus tutoring, but he'd promised me that I was safe, that my virginity was safe, and that he would get me into a good school where I would be safe from lecherous step-grandfathers, and no one would beat me for the sins of others. All I had to do was to have faith. And then, it had come.

The Word.

"You are my wife."

I had not known what to do, what to think. Like everything else in life, this made no sense. Maybe it wasn't really happening. I knew I was too young to get married, and true to his word, a month had gone by, and I was still virgin. School had taken a detour because he had been asked to preach at several churches along the way.

Then, he had told them that we were married. By the Lord. I knew that someone must have spoken with him about it, because he told me. They disapproved. But he was the Lord's prophet, and the Lord had given me to him to be his wife. Swallowed fingernail clippings, his version of a ceremony.

After that, he was always angry with me.

“I could love you if you were ten.”

My appetite left me again, as the pain down there started, right in step with the nausea. Again, it had been nearly six months since my last period. Everyone said I looked too thin, but was I pregnant? How would I know? At least it gained me favor in his eyes, and freedom from his appetites.

***